



# Short Order

*By B. D. Rockford*

THE NOON rush tapered off to nothing around two o'clock. Bailey dumped the last batch of dirty dishes off the counter into the sink to soak, and moved over to the cash register to check up on the lunch-time take.

Johnson, the new short-order cook,

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was scraping the grill with a spatula and humming "Camptown Races" under his breath. He gave the grill a final swab with a clean rag and dropped a small steak on to fry for his own lunch.

He was a long, lean man with a dour face and hurt-looking eyes. He

by

JOHN F. SUTER

took off his grease-spotted white apron, hung it up, ladled a bowl of the chicken soup for himself, and sat at the counter eating the soup, while his steak sizzled.

Presently Bailey shut the cash drawer with a *ding!* and sighed pleasantly.

"Six-and-a-half up over yesterday's lunch," he announced. "And yesterday was up five bucks from the day before."

Johnson grunted approval and went on working at his soup. For the moment, the two men were alone in the diner.

It was not a large place—one dark mahogany counter with ten white stools along it and the cash register in the middle. The big chromium coffee urn was behind the register. Johnson had his grill and a little steam table to the right of the urn, near the ice-box. The sink was at the other end. There was no room to spare in back of the counter.

Outside, the place looked like an old-fashioned street car painted a gay red and white. This was no accident; once it had been a street car. A small neon sign with "BAILEY'S DINER" in white letters inside a red border, swung over the sidewalk.

Bailey shut the cash drawer, lit a cigarette, and exhaled slowly.

"You like this work, Johnson?" he asked.

The cook grunted.

"It'll do."

Bailey inspected the tip of his cigarette. "Well, it seems to me business has picked up since you started working. Get quite a few plugs for

the cooking. Thought you'd like to know."

Johnson tilted the bowl to get the last of the soup. "Sure. Thanks."

"Well, I just thought you'd like to know," Bailey repeated. "I hope you'll be around for awhile."

Johnson stepped around the end of the counter and took up his steak. He slid it onto a plate and helped himself to green peas and mashed potatoes and gravy.

"Well, that depends," he said, as he came back and sat down again. He cut the steak meticulously, popping small bites into his mouth.

"Sure, sure, I know: Okay—what do you say to a five buck raise?"

Johnson looked directly at Bailey. His dark eyes were sad and blank.

Bailey passed a plump hand nervously over his short red hair. He was a large man who ran naturally to weight, and his face would have been very plain and kindly, except that he wore a perpetual worried look.

"I only been here a week," Johnson said finally. "But if you think it's worth it . . ."

"Well, I'll tell you," Bailey said, a smile breaking his worried frown, "if your work makes that bell ring faster, seems to me its only right you should get a cut."

Johnson grunted. "If that's what 'right' means to you, Mr. Bailey, we'll get along fine."

Bailey nodded, and went to work on a ledger which he took from under the cash register. Johnson finished his meal, lit a cigarette, and stood in the doorway. Earlier in the

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day it had rained, but now the clouds were breaking up. The air off the wet streets was fresh and damp. Johnson propped the door open with one foot, and stood smoking and watching his employer.

"Whatta you always look so worried about?" he asked unexpectedly. "You just admitted business is good."

Bailey looked at him for a moment, puzzled. Then he smiled ruefully and ran a hand over his bristling hair in his characteristic gesture.

"What the hell," he said. "I guess it's a habit."

He worked a little longer, and laid down his pencil.

"You married?" he asked Johnson.

Johnson shook his head, grimacing.

"Huh-uh." Bailey sighed heavily. "Sometimes . . . oh, well."

"You married?" asked Johnson.

"Uh-huh." Bailey swung sideways on the stool, fished in several pockets. "Spare a smoke?"

Johnson tossed him the pack.

"I guess it's just the way women are," said Bailey, as he lit up. "Hell, I don't blame 'em, really. They got nothin' to do at home, all day long. The car's there, and they go for a ride . . ." His voice trailed off.

"She have a crack-up?"

Bailey shook his head. "Nah. Nothin' much. Smashed the radiator's about all. But it was her fault, and the other guy had her dead to rights, and I gotta pay *his* bill, too."

He sighed. "Well—she's young.

She's gotta have some fun, I guess." Johnson said "Tough."

Bailey stubbed out his cigarette.

"You oughta have a place of your own, Johnson. Be your own boss. With your cooking, it'd go like a house afire. You never get anyplace working for somebody else."

"I'm doin' okay, here."

"Sure. You'll never need a job, you're too good a cook. But it's fine, havin' your own business." Bailey smiled. "Means everything to *me*. Look at this little diner. Ten stools an' a simple menu, neat 'n sweet, an' I'm doin' fine. If I could only get out from under my home troubles—but hell, even so, it's good. People come back here to eat."

"You seem to get the business, all right," Johnson nodded.

"You shoulda seen the joint when I took over, Johnson. Dirty—greasy—cockroaches in the ice-box, owner had no idea how to treat folks. But now—hell, I had a good offer for it just last week."

"No kiddin'."

"Sure. Sloane, the real estate man, told me he had a customer."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Doesn't matter. Told him I didn't want to sell. I got a good thing here." Again, the hand over the red hair. "The way things are at home, I have to have a good thing."

Johnson threw away his cigarette. "You could have a lot bigger place here. There's space on this lot for a real restaurant."

Bailey shook his head stubbornly. "I don't want one. Sure I could have

a big place, and some big headaches with it, too. No thanks."

The screen door squeaked and banged and a customer walked in, a tall man wearing a hat and a tan polo coat with the collar turned up. He sat down, slowly and deliberately, and placed his hands on the edge of the counter.

Bailey set a glass of water in front of him.

"Yes, sir. What'll it be?"

"Hamburger and coffee."

"Right! How'll you have the hamburger?"

"Rare," the man said.

"One rare!" Bailey told Johnson. He stepped to the shining upright urns. "Cream in your coffee?"

"Black."

Bailey set a cup of coffee in front of him.

"You take a little joint like this," he began again to Johnson over the sputtering of the frying meat, when the telephone rang, and he took down the receiver.

"Bailey's Diner. Yeah. Yeah, Virginia. No, it was still in the garage on my way down. He said not before tomorrow . . . sure, I told 'em to hurry it up. But they're short-handed now, like everyone else . . . Now, Ginny, it was a job for a mechanic, and I'm no mechanic. . . . Well, sure I'm sorry. How about the bus? Well, then a taxi?"

The door banged again, as two more customers came in.

"Look, you do what you have to do. Take a taxi. I gotta hang up, the place is filling up. Bye."

He set water in front of the two

newcomers.

"What's it gonna be today, gentlemen?"

Johnson slid a patty of savory, sizzling meat between the halves of a toasted bun, put it on a plate, and set it in front of the man in the polo coat. He set a little crinkled paper cup with ketchup in it alongside the plate.

The shorter of the two newcomers laid down the menu.

"Think I'll take a chance on the ro—"

"This little paper cup all the ketchup I get?" The polo coat man's voice was sharp, querulous.

As he spoke, he took his hat off and tossed it onto the vacant stool beside him.

Bailey's stomach did an elevator drop. One of the other two customers said "My God . . . !"

The other one just stared until he realized he was staring. Then a dull red flush crept up his face.

The man had a huge scar for a face, a pink-and-pearl-shiny desert of ravaged tissue stretched over the bones of his skull. The nose was two black holes, the mouth just a lipless slit. One eye was normal, and there was no other eye, simply an empty hole with eyelids that sagged loosely together.

He repeated himself, elaborately, offensively. "I said: How about some ketchup? Where's the bottle?"

Johnson stood before him, impassive. "I'm sorry, mister. Ketchup's hard to get. That's all we can serve anybody."

The man muttered, through the

ragged mouth. "Damn profiteers!"

"I'm sorry," said Johnson. "Anything else?"

The man said "No." Johnson went away, and the man began to pass the sandwich into his mouth, making small sucking sounds with his lips.

Bailey swallowed hard and turned back to the other two customers.

"What was it you wanted, sir . . . ?"

"Er . . . nothing, nothing at all. I—just remembered an appointment. Gotta go."

"Me, too," mumbled the other man. "We're together."

They went out as if they were in a hurry. The faceless man sat unperturbed, sucking at his hamburger. Occasionally he drank loudly of his coffee. Bailey turned his back and pretended to figure at the cash register, but his pencil hovered over the paper without making a mark.

"Eh?" he said, startled.

He looked up and cringed unconsciously at the sight of the face looming over him.

"Well, what's the matter? Don't you want to take my money?"

"Oh—oh, sure. Uh—twenty-five outa one. Uh—thanks. Come back agai . . . "

His voice trailed off as the man crossed to the door, and went out.

"Jesus!" he said. "What a face!"

"You're telling me!" said Johnson fervidly.

Bailey ran a hand over his face. "I'll dream about that!"

"Kinda made you nervous, did he?"

"I dunno. Was I very bad?"

Johnson laughed. "No-o. Not too

bad. I noticed you hung kinda close to that gun you keep under the register, though."

"No kidding!" Bailey laughed nervously. He took an old Army forty-five automatic out from under the cash register, looked at it, hefted it, and put it back. "Kind of a—a reflex, I guess."

He took the soiled plate and cup and put them in the sink.

"The poor guy!" He said. "I oughta be ashamed. "He probably was in an accident—explosion, or something. Looks like he was burned."

"Or scalded, maybe."

"Plastic surgery, I guess, this is."

"Yeah, by Dr. Frankenstein," laughed Johnson.

"Huh? Oh, yeah—Frankenstein. You said it, Johnson."

"I notice you kinda caught yourself up, on telling him to come back again."

Bailey shook his head.

"I hope I never see him again," he said with sincerity. "Did you see what just the sight of him did to those other two customers?"

Johnson grunted. "You mean, they was *about* to be customers, until they seen him."

**T**H E DINNER-HOUR rush in the Diner usually started between five-thirty and six. At six o'clock, every stool along the counter would be occupied, and usually two or three people would be standing, waiting to be seated.

At five-thirty there were seven customers in the Diner. Four of them were regulars, eating the pot roast

dinner, and certain to order pie afterward.

Bailey was doing a quick wash-and-dry job on some plates and cups when the door opened to let in the man in the polo coat.

Bailey straightened up and stared, mouth open, a cup in one hand, towel in the other. The man was quite natural. He walked quickly and casually to a stool, sat down, unbuttoned his coat, and removed his hat.

The face was the same. The single eye darted glances here and there and finally fixed its gaze on Bailey.

"Hamburger! Rare!"

It was the same voice, too; high, harsh, antagonistic.

"Well, are you going to stand there, or does the cook get my order?"

The lipless mouth articulated the words angrily, in a complete silence that had fallen, along the counter. No one was eating. The man beside the newcomer sucked his breath in, as from a kick in the stomach, and shrank visibly, as the one eye swivelled to regard him sharply, for a moment, out of the mask of mother-of-pearl tissue.

Only Johnson worked on at his grill, unperturbed.

"One rare," he said, as though Bailey had transmitted the order.

Bailey set a glass of water on the counter. The man looked straight ahead, breathing loudly through the holes in his dreadful face.

Two customers got up and came to the cash register, carrying dollar bills. Bailey took their money.

"No pie . . ?" he asked of them, as he made change.

One shook his head. The other said, "I don't feel hungry." Both turned and hurried out into the darkness.

Two other customers followed them out, almost immediately. Both left large portions of uneaten food on their plates.

Three new customers came in. One sat down alongside the scar-faced man, as Johnson, his dark eyes remote, slid a smoking hamburger sandwich onto the counter.

"Ketchup," said the man.

Johnson placed a small paper cup of ketchup beside his plate.

The scarred man struck the counter a blow with the flat of his hand.

"Damn it," he said, loudly, harshly, "I like ketchup, and what I get is this stinking little cupful! Hand me the bottle!"

The men along the counter exchanged covert, shamed looks.

Bailey tried to keep his voice calm and polite.

"You was told this afternoon, sir. It's hard to get."

"Hard to get!" The man took a bite from the sandwich sucking little bits of loose bread and meat into his mouth. Chewing, he turned to the customer on the stool beside him.

"Hell of a note when a man can't get a little ketchup," he said, talking through the mouthful of food.

His neighbor stared at the empty eye-socket. Suddenly he got up and hurried out of the Diner, leaving a dollar beside his plate.

row at lunch."

"Hey!" exclaimed Bailey.

"Oh, sure. The check. Here." He threw a quarter on the counter.

"No," began Bailey. "I mean——"

The man halted, and slowly turned his death-mask visage full on Bailey. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Nothing," said Bailey, swallowing hard. "Nothing."

JOHNSON eased his lean body onto a stool and lit a cigarette. At the scratch of the match, Bailey glanced up from the sink.

"Johnson!" he said, angrily. "What's the idea, smoking durin' dinner?"

The cook slowly exhaled a lungful of smoke. "Why not?" he said. "Nobody here."

Bailey stared sadly at the empty stools. "Yeah . . yeah . ." he muttered. "Jeeze, I don't know . . ."

Johnson cocked one long leg over the other.

"You know what I think?" he said. Bailey didn't reply, and he continued. "I think that guy with the scarred face has brought us bad luck. Everything was swell, until he showed up."

"Bad luck!" laughed Bailey, bitterly. "He's ruined us."

"Figure it out for yourself," Johnson said, judicially. He's been in here every day for lunch and every night for dinner, for the last week. And what happens—you've lost all your regular customers. Why? Because they can't stand him. He makes a horse's neck of himself, what with his nasty cracks and the way he

"Hey, your change, sir!"

Bailey's voice had an odd, despairing note in it. The slammed door put a period to his speech.

As if by common consent, the rest of the customers at the counter, one by one, silently got off their stools, paid and left.

The scarred man, Bailey, and Johnson were left alone, as the man stolidly fed his sandwich into his ruined face.

"Coffee," he said. "Black." When Bailey brought it, he drank loudly.

The door opened and a party of two women and a man stepped in. The women were laughing at something the man had just said, darting shocked, delighted glances at him. He was grinning complacently. All three obviously were tight.

The scarred man swung around on his stool and stared at the trio. They stared at him, and their laughter quieted like a silenced radio. The man said, "My God!"

"Oh!" She turned, swaying a little, bumped against the man, and ran from the Diner.

The man looked glassily over the scarred face at Bailey and Johnson. He wagged an inebriated finger. "Get away!" he said roguishly. "Shram! I ain's pose start seein' thingsh like you fer shix hoursh, yet!" He giggled. "You shtay," he admonished. "We're leavin'!" He seized the woman's arm, and they went out.

Bailey swore softly, and Johnson shot a quick glance at him. The scarred man sucked down the last of his coffee.

"Well," he said, "see you tomor-

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handles his food. Almost makes me sick."

Bailey groaned. "I don't know . . . I don't know."

"That ketchup routine is what really makes me sore," said Johnson calmly. "Imagine, throwin' a dollar on the counter the other day, and tellin' you to go out and buy a bottle, just for him!"

He threw the cigarette on the floor and stepped on it.

"Well," he said, cheerfully, "he ought to be along, any minute, now."

Bailey straightened. "If that scar-faced nightmare walks in here to-night," he said, slowly, "I'll—"

The ring of the telephone interrupted him. Bailey walked over to the wall instrument, slowly, tiredly.

"Bailey's Diner," he said. "Virginia? Yeah. What . . . ? Wrecked, you say? Oh, my God, honey, are you all right? Oh, swell! . . . How bad was it?"

He put his hand over the mouth-piece, and turned a white face on Johnson. "Ginny had a wreck," he said, shakily.

"Gee," Johnson said, "that's tough."

"Where are you?" Bailey asked into the phone. "Right in front of the house? . . . How about the other guy? . . . Oh . . . But no insurance? . . . Look, Virginia, you could o' been just a little careful . . . No, I'm not bawlin' you out, I'm worried about you . . . I didn't say that, Ginny, all I said was . . . Well, where are we gonna get another car? I can't buy one, the way things are going lately . . . Aw, now look, baby, gimme a break, can't you?"

You know how I feel . . . Hey!" He hung up.

"She hurt?" asked Johnson.

Bailey's shoulders sagged. "No, she's all right. Gosh, you'd think a man's wife would be a little—well, understanding . . ." He sighed heavily.

"Here it comes," said Johnson casually.

The door opened and the scar-faced man walked into the Diner. "Hamburger," he said, sitting down, his disfigured countenance blank and impersonal.

"You bring your lunch?" said Bailey casually.

"How's that?" said the man sharply.

"If you brought your lunch," said Bailey, "okay, lay it on the counter and eat it."

"Don't be funny, Joe," said the scarred man harshly. "Give me a hamburger, and be quick about it."

Bailey came and placed his hands on the counter, wide apart. "Listen, mister," he said, "I don't like you. I'm tired of seein' you around, see? Why'nt you go someplace else and eat?"

"We'll see about that!" rasped the man. "Hey, you, cook, over there! Make me a hamburger, will you?"

Johnson looked at Bailey. "If the boss—" he began, doubtfully.

"Leave the cook outta this," said Bailey harshly.

"Jeeze, Mr. Bailey," said Johnson. "I mean—it ain't the man's fault. How would *you* feel?"

A spasm twisted Bailey's kindly face. He looked about him like an animal at bay. Then his jaw set.

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"I won't serve you. I don't want you in the place. Beat it!"

The stranger let his breath out through the ragged nostrils in his scarred face with a whistling sound.

"I see. Well, look, you. I came in here to get something to eat. I'll sit here all night, if I have to, until I get it."

Bailey went to the door, opened it, and stuck his head out.

"Oh, Ryan!" he shouted.

The beefy, blue-uniformed policeman loitering alongside the fruit stand on the corner looked up.

"What—oh, it's you, Bailey! Anything wrong?" he called.

"Can you come here a minute, Ryan?"

"Sure thing, Bailey!"

A moment later he stood in the doorway.

"What can we do for you, Bailey?"

Bailey indicated the man sitting on the stool. "See that man? I want him either arrested or thrown out of here."

"That so?" said the policeman. "Givin' you trouble, is he?" He raised his voice. "Hey, you!"

The stranger looked at Ryan, and the cop's red face twitched at the sight.

"You talking to me?" he said.

"Yer darned right I am," said Ryan. "Now, Mr. Bailey, what's the charge?"

"Making a nuisance of himself," said Bailey, calmly.

"I don't get this," said the man. His high voice was conciliatory. "All I'm doing is trying to get something to eat."

"Look at him, Ryan," said Bailey.

"I am." The policeman grimaced. "Not very pretty, is he?"

"Every day he comes in here. Every day for the last week. I can't get anybody else to come near the place while he's here. He stays and stays and drives most of my business away. I'm goin' broke, Ryan, just on account of this—this guy."

"That's too bad," said the man. He licked the edges of his lipless mouth and spoke to Ryan. "Too bad, but I have to eat, the same as anybody else."

Ryan scratched his head.

"Has he done anything else?" he asked Bailey. "Get tough, or insult people?"

"Well, no—" Bailey frowned. "But—"

"All I do is come in and eat," said the scar-faced man.

Ryan pursed his lips. "I dunno, Mr. Bailey. Course, it's your place."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bailey.

"He means," said the stranger, "that if I mind my own business you can't run me out, whether you like it or not. You can't run me out if I ask you to serve me."

"By God, I—"

"And, if I ask you for something to eat and offer you money for it, you have to sell it to me, if you have it!"

"Oh, no, I don't!" Bailey's voice was high, almost shrill.

"You'd better," said the scarred man, "or I'll have you in court before you know it."

"Ryan—can he do that?"

The big cop nodded his head.  
"I'm afraid he can, Bailey."

"Damn it, Ryan, I can refuse service to anyone!"

"Right, Bailey—but you better be able to prove to a court that the guy was disorderly and makin' a nuisance of himself. Now, far's I can see, this fella is—well you admit yerself, he ain't made no trouble. Now, why don't you just give him his dinner an' then he'll go? He grained, patted Bailey on the shoulder, and went out.

"Well," said the stranger, in his old hard, high voice, with a new vicious edge on it, "how about it?"

"All right," Bailey said in a dead voice. "Johnson, get him what he wants."

"Okay," said Johnson.

Bailey started to stack some plates. The telephone rang.

"Goddammit!" screamed Bailey.

He swung the heavy plate in his hand like a discus, and threw it, with all his strength, at the ringing phone.

Splintered chunks of thick china sprayed off the black wall-box, and the phone listed half an inch with a final, dying jangle.

"Mr. Bailey!" Johnson turned from the grill, white-faced. Then he saw Bailey reaching under the cash register.

"Mr. Bailey, don't do it! You'll be sor—"

Bailey waved the heavy automatic. "Keep away from me, Johnson!" His voice cracked. "You!" he said to the scarred man at the counter. "Get out of this diner and don't come back. If you do come back, I'll

shoot you, so help me, God, I'll shoot you!"

"Don't bother me," said the man casually.

Bailey gaped. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you . . . Now go away." Bailey's face went dark red.

"All right," he said, in a shaking voice, "you asked for it."

"Mr. Bailey . . ." screamed Johnson.

The great sound of the report seemed to bulge out the walls. The noise went away, and Bailey still stood there, the muzzle of the gun leveled, pointblank, at the scarred man's chest.

The torn mouth was twisted in an awful smile.

The gun thudded on the floor from Bailey's lax fingers. The stranger continued to smile.

"See?" he said, "It didn't hurt me at all."

"Oh, God!"

The exclamation was a sob. Bailey put his big, doubled fists up to his head, and began to cry. The great wet sobs came up slowly from deep inside, shaking his body.

"How about some ketchup, you?" said the stranger to Johnson.

He was laughing heartily.

JOHNSON set a bowl of eggs in the ice-box, straightened up, and wiped his hands on his apron.

"Well," he said briskly, "I guess we're all set, Mr. Tanner. You got the lay of the joint now. Figure on—er—makin' any changes?"

The tall man in the tan polo coat pursed his lips. They were thin lips,

set in a narrow face, with close-together eyes, but the general effect was not unpleasing.

"No," he said, in a quiet polished voice, "not right away. I can build on this lot any time, and I want to do it right when I'm ready to go. For now, I'll just keep the diner open, as usual. Bailey had a good thing here."

"How did he seem when the deal was closed?" asked Johnson.

"Can't say," Tanner shrugged. "I let the lawyers handle everything."

"If I know you," said Johnson, a sly look in his sad, dark eyes, "he took a beatin'."

"Not bad. I figure he recovered about seventy percent of his investment here. He was lucky. I felt sorry for him."

"Then you didn't see him at all?"

"No. Not at all."

"Think he'd know you without the make-up?"

"Maybe," said Tanner. He grinned, put a hand up to one of his eyes, and scooped it out. He bounced the glass eye in one cupped hand. "Maybe, like this."

"Uh . . . lucky I changed the bullets in that gun for blanks."

Tanner put his eye back in place, and smiled faintly. "Yes . . . I'm glad I foresaw that possibility."

He went behind the counter and began checking over the supplies.

"You might say I saved your life, huh?"

"You might," said Tanner. "Don't worry, Johnson, you'll be taken care of."

"I ain't worryin'. Never had reason to yet, have I?"

"No," said Tanner. "But just for your information, Johnson, we've committed no crime. We didn't take this place from Bailey by force. We didn't swindle him. I paid money on the line for it. Remember that."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Tanner. Hey!" He held up a cautioning hand. "Customer." Then, softly, he added, "Holy mother!"

He raised his voice, and brought out a cheery "Why, it's Mr. Bailey! Come right in!"

Bailey stood in the doorway, looking around as if he were entering the diner for the first time..

"Hello, Johnson," he muttered.

"Have a seat," said Johnson, hastily. "Uh—by the way, you know Mr. Tanner? He bought the place."

"Nope." Bailey sat wearily on a stool. "Never met him. Glad to know you. I see you still got 'Bailey's Diner' out front."

"I'll be taking that down," offered Tanner.

Bailey shrugged. "Leave it up, if you like. May be a little good will in it. Though I can't say I seemed to have much good will left by the time I sold out."

He looked at Tanner for a moment. "You know, there is something familiar about you. Maybe I met you someplace?"

"I was in once or twice," offered Tanner. "Looked the place over before I had Sloane talk to you."

"Yeah," Bailey said, "I guess that's it. How you makin' out?"

"Just gettin' started," interposed Johnson. "I'm kinda breakin' Mr. Tanner in."

"Well," sighed Bailey, "I hope

his luck's better 'n mine. Has that guy with the face showed up any more?"

"Haven't seen hide or hair of him," said Johnson. "Place was closed for several days."

"Well," Bailey said, speaking to Tanner, "if he ever comes around, you better close up and go home. He was bad luck in person. Maybe it wasn't strictly fair to let you buy, at that."

Tanner laughed. "I don't think he'll show up."

"I hope not," Bailey said. "It's a wonder I got any mind left, after what he put me through."

"How's your wife?" asked Johnson, nervously.

"Who—Ginny? Oh, I dunno. We may split up. Maybe I spent too much time here'n not enough home. Or something. What the hell."

"Gee, I'm sorry, Mr. Bailey. Can I fix you something?"

"No, thanks, Johnson. Not hungry."

"Well, you're the boss." Bailey laughed bitterly. "I was, you mean. I would like to step in behind the counter, one last time—just to—sort of look around. You mind, Mr. Tanner?"

"Not at all," said Tanner. "Come ahead."

Bailey ducked under the counter and looked around him.

"Haven't changed anything, I see."

"Not a thing," said Tanner. "We'll operate just as you did."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Care for a cuppa coffee, Mr. Bailey?" asked Johnson. "You look tired."

"Uh . . . yeah, thanks. Don't mind if I do."

Bailey leaned wearily against the counter. Tanner went on checking his supplies, referring to a typed list. Johnson brought a cup of coffee, and Bailey took it black. He continued to look longingly around the place.

"Y'know," he said, "I'm gonna miss it. Probably sounds silly, Mr. Tanner. This joint was a kind of a . . . oh, the hell with it! You know."

"Sure," said Tanner.

"This coffee urn's too full," said Johnson. "Hand me that pitcher, will you, Mr. Bailey? I'm gonna take some out."

Bailey handed him the pitcher. "One last look and I'm out o' your hair. All the things I won't be seeing any more—buns—butter-pats—coffee cream—mustard—ketchup . . . Well, I'll be—"

He stopped, his eyes wide, as he surveyed the shining ranks of red bottles. "Where did you get all the ketchup, Johnson?"

Johnson dropped a pan with a clatter, and fumbled for it. He straightened up. Why, uh, why, I . . ."

"I ordered that," said Tanner, looking around, list in hand. "Why?"

"Ordered it? So did I!" exclaimed Bailey. "But I never got a smell of it in those quantities. You're lucky."

"All in knowing the right people, I guess," said Tanner easily.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I especially like ketchup myself," Tanner added.

Bailey picked up the coffee, brought it halfway to his lips, and

paused.

He looked at Tanner sharply.

"What was that . . . ?"

Tanner glanced at him. "I said, I like ketchup."

"Fond of ketchup, are you?"

Bailey's tone was level, but it brought Tanner around from his task.

"Eh? How's—"

"Fond of ketchup! I think I know you, Tanner! That face—sure, it was you! Make-up, wasn't it, that face?"

"I don't know what you're—"

Bailey took a step toward Tanner.

"Johnson was in on it with you, wasn't he? Johnson helped you, wasn't that it, Tanner? He fixed the gun, didn't he?" Bailey raised his voice, and moved toward Tanner. "Didn't be, Tanner?"

"Bailey, what's the matter—"

"The coffee's runnin' over!" cried Johnson. "Mr. Bailey, you're makin' a big—"

"Shut up, Johnson! Put your fists, Tanner!"

Tanner started backing away. "Johnson, get a policeman!"

"Yeah, call Ryan, Johnson!" Bailey still moved toward Tanner. The new owner seized a heavy dinner plate.

"The coffee, Mr. Tanner . . ." Johnson's voice was agonized. "Let me turn it off!"

"To hell with the coffee! This man's crazy!"

Johnson ran to the door.

"Ryan!" he screamed. "Hey, Ryan!"

Bailey swung a round-house right at Tanner. The man jerked away,

and threw the plate at Bailey. It missed, and crashed against the grill. He grabbed another plate, and threw it wildly at Bailey.

Bailey laughed. "You dirty, stinking skunk, Tanner! Devil a man out of his business, and wreck his home to boot! Wait'll I get my hands . . . ouch!"

He jumped away from the overflowing pitcherful of boiling-hot coffee. Then his eyes blazed. He snatched dish-towels from the rack, wadded them around his hands, and seized the pitcher of smoking coffee. Tanner divined his purpose, then, and screamed thinly.

"Hurry, Ryan!" howled Johnson.

"Johnson! Johnson! Don't let him—"

The flying mass of dark-amber liquid took him full in the face, a scalding bath of boiling intensity.

Again and again Tanner screamed, raw, shapeless shrieks of agony, his hands clawing at his parboiled face.

Ryan erupted from the street.

"Now, what's this?" he roared. "Holy angels an—"

Tanner screamed again. The cop's jaw dropped.

Bailey was laughing hysterically. He pointed at the shrieking, sightless man.

"It's all right, Ryan. Nothing wrong, nothing—" he bent over, laughing "—really wrong. That's not his real face you see there, Ryan. Don't let him fool you. Wait a little while, and he'll have his real face, again—in short order!"